

## EUROPEANIZATION OF REGIONAL POLICY IN SLOVAKIA: THE POLITICAL PARTIES' APPROACH

## EUROPEIZÁCIA REGIONÁLNEJ POLITIKY NA SLOVENSKU: PRÍSTUP POLITICKÝCH STRÁN

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### Abstract

In this article we aim to put into context the Europeanization of regional policy in Slovakia with respect to the attitudes of the selected political parties towards regional policy-making in Slovakia as well at the level of the European Union. The effect of coercion and Europeanisation mechanisms in the form of EU norms and structures on the regional policies in Slovakia is examined, particularly after the EU accession in 2004. Our data source consist of the approved election manifestos of seven selected Slovak political parties contesting in the general elections of 2023. Using the data from the manifestos, the article examines the electoral strategies and contentions regarding regional policy at domestic as well as European level. The analysis focuses on the party programs regarding regional policies, including their visions and problems related to accomplishing these policies, and comparing and contrasting their tendencies and positions. Thus, the author adds to already existing knowledge that deals with the Europeanization of regional policy with focus to political party activities in regional development in Slovakia.

Keywords: regional policy, political parties, Slovakia, Europeanization, general elections

### Abstrakt

Tento článok venuje pozornosť kontextu europeizácie regionálnej politiky v Slovensku z hľadiska postojov vybraných politických strán k tvorbe regionálnej politiky na Slovensku, ako aj na úrovni Európskej únie. Identifikujeme účinok mechanizmov nátlaku a europeizácie vo forme noriem EÚ a štruktúr na regionálne politiky v Slovensku, najmä v kontexte vstupu Slovenska do EÚ v roku 2004. Naš zdroj údajov pozostáva z predvolebných programov k parlamentným voľbám na Slovensku v roku 2023. Použitie údajov z volebných programov umožňuje skúmať volebné stratégie a priority týkajúce sa regionálnej politiky na domácej aj európskej úrovni. Analýza sa preto zameriava na programy strán týkajúce sa regionálnych politik vrátane ich vízií a problémov súvisiacich s vykonaním týchto politik a porovnania ich tendencií a pozícií. Autor teda prispieva k existujúcemu poznaniu v štúdiu europeizácie regionálnej politiky so zameraním na činnosť politických strán v oblasti regionálneho rozvoja na Slovensku.

Kľúčové slová: regionálna politika, politické strany, Slovensko, Europeizácia, parlamentné voľby

### Introduction

The regional policy of the European Union, usually referred to as the Cohesion policy, is one

of the most explored and most important areas of the European governance and integration policies. The Cohesion policy per se contributed to

numerous discussions as well as theoretical and empirical works in the field of EU regional policy which we discuss using the up to date literature. The key issues of EU regional policy include the development, assessment and impact on economic convergence, governance, sustainability, regional competitiveness and disparities across regions. Cohesion policy is also one of the most important tools which help to narrow down the gap between the low performing and well-developed regions in the Member States of the European Union. In this paper, the evolution, mechanisms, impacts, and challenges of the regional policy of the European Union are discussed. The paper focuses on the specific origins and objectives of the policy, its institutional background, the sources of funding, including the actors involved in regional policy. Furthermore, it examines to what extent a regional policy has been effective in equalizing the economic achievements whilst addressing the socio-economic disparities within the EU and the context of Europeanization. This paper seeks to discuss and assess the Europeanization of regional policy in Slovakia through the lenses of the electoral programmes of Slovak political parties and attitudes of particular relevant political parties.

### Data and Methods

The initial step involves the identification of the dimensions of regional policymaking at the EU and national levels through the utilisation of a literature review. Subsequently, a selection of relevant Slovak political parties is established based on their parliamentary status as well as the degree of significance they hold within the Slovak party system. In light of this selection, we have employed the content analysis method to examine their electoral manifestos submitted for the 2023 general elections, with a view to ascertaining the principal domains, themes and strategies pertaining to regional policymaking, as well as the parties' vision and updates on this matter.

The relevant political parties and movements include: SMER-Sociálna demokracia, HLAS-Sociálna demokracia, Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party, SNS), Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement, KDĽ), Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity, SaS), hnutie Slovensko (Slovakia movement, former OĽANO Movement) and Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia, PS). All of these selected parties have acquired parliamentary status in the recent 2023 general elections to National Council of the Slovak Republic, thus representing the current political agenda setting in Slovakia.

We have assembled electoral manifestos and supplementary party materials that exemplify the present positions of the party and its leadership with respect to regional policymaking at the European and national levels. Subsequently,

we have captured and discussed the principal topics, domains, and themes pertaining to this specific agenda. The political parties' approach has been analyzed through the lens of their political manifestos in a comparative context to identify similarities and differences, thereby providing a nuanced examination of these approaches.

### Development, Mechanisms and Challenges to EU Regional Policy: A Literature Review

The roots of EU regional policy can be found in the EEC treaties, specifically in the Treaties of Rome (1957). This policy framework remained unformulated until the 1970s period, when EEC expanded to include UK, Ireland and Denmark. The creation of the European Regional Development Fund in 1975 has been an important milestone in the attempt to address the disparities between the regions. The foundations of new mechanisms were laid down by the Single European Act (1986) and further elaborated in the Maastricht Treaty (1992) focusing on bridging the regionally uneven development as one of the important principles of the EU. The following expansion of the European Union in 2004, 2007 and 2013 posed new problems such as integrating Central and Eastern European countries with underdeveloped economies, which posed new challenges of disparity between regions.

The EU's regional policy is implemented through the use of contractual financial instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund. It aims to address regional imbalances and promote economic and social cohesion. It is an essential strategic investment covering infrastructure establishment, innovation, SMEs and environment protection (European Commission 2020a; Bachtler, Mendez and Wishlade 2013). The European Social Fund aims to increase employment opportunities, promote education and life-long learning as well as help social integration in Europe. One of the keys issues is dealing with structural unemployment and social exclusion in less developed areas (European Commission, 2021a).

The Cohesion Fund helps less developed regions with major infrastructure projects in transport and the environment (European Commission, 2019). The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development is a financial instrument designed to facilitate rural development across EU member states. The fund belongs under the CAP, which addresses economic, social, and environmental challenges in the EU rural areas. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund supports the maritime sector (European Commission, 2017) while its policy is structured around multi-annual financial frameworks (currently 2021 to 2027). To this date, EU policies have helped and reduced economic disparities between less developed and more developed regions; since the global financial crisis of 2008–2013, investments in infrastructure in Southern and Eastern Europe have contributed to

economic growth and job creation. The ESF has reduced social disparities by supporting skills, employment and anti-poverty initiatives. However, long-term unemployment and social exclusion remain major issues, particularly for marginalised groups (Kadri, Bobek, Horvat, 2021). Currently, the EU strives to integrate environmental and climate objectives into regional policy to meet the challenges of sustainability and the Green Deal. Balancing economic growth and environmental protection is vital for long-term policy success. Studies by Barca, McCann, Rodríguez-Pose (2012) and Böhme *et al.* (2019) show the need for a more integrated approach to align regional policy with environmental objectives. The digital transition presents both opportunities and challenges for regional policy. It is vital that all regions benefit from the digital economy to reduce disparities and promote competitiveness. Authors (McCann, Ortega-Argilés 2015; Cappello, Caragliu, Fratesi, 2020) examine how regions can leverage digitalisation to enhance competitiveness and innovation. The existing literature demonstrates the evolution of EU regional policy, from its initial peripheral concern to its subsequent establishment as a central element of the European integration project. The earliest studies of this subject, such as those by Allen (1979) and Leonardi (1995), place significant emphasis on the origins of the policy, situating its genesis within the context of the growing disparities that were intensified by the process of market integration. Bache (1998) and Marks (1993) posit that the evolution of the policy aligns with the broader trajectory of European integration, with regional policy serving dual economic and political objectives, including the legitimization of the EU itself. A further significant area of focus has been the enlargement of the EU, in particular the accession of Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovakia.

The EU regional policy has evolved into several theoretical concepts. The first is represented by multi-level governance framework (Hooghe, Marks, 2001; Marks, 1993), which explains the mechanisms through which EU regional policy plays its role across diverse governmental levels. This approach can be characterized by a matrix of interconnections and interplay between supranational, national and sub-national actors in the processes of policy-making and implementation. The concept of Europeanization (Börzel, 2005; Radaelli, 2003) has been used to assess the influence of EU regional policy on domestic policies and governance structures within member states.

The growing research on Europeanization has focused on the adaptation of national and regional institutions to EU norms, measuring the plethora of potential impacts across member states in the EU integration process (Ladrech, 2010). New regionalism (Keating, 1998; Loughlin, 2007) as a third approach sheds light into the position

of regions and its role as active players in the national and, especially supra-national multi-level governance system. This approach is particularly important to elicit how regions manage resources, engage in cross-border cooperation projects and assert their positions within the member states' as well as EU framework. The empirical evidence on the impact of the policy (Becker *et al.*, 2010), indicates that while some convergence has occurred, significant disparities remain. For example, the effectiveness of the regional policy can be equal to the quality of regional governance (Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo, 2015). Other scholars (Crescenzi, Giua, 2016) have found out the present existence of socio-economic inequalities and the urban-rural division as significant challenges. There is still a great number of challenges associated with the translation and transition of the EU regional policy objectives into effective actions at the regional level such as the burden of bureaucratic complexity, inconsistencies in administrative capacity, and the influence of national and regional political dynamics, which are frequently identified as barriers to effective implementation.

### Europeanization of Regional Policy in Slovakia

Slovakia has developed regional policy, especially in connection with decentralisation and multi-level governance since entering the EU in 2004. The governance of Slovakia's regions is a complex interaction between regional governance reforms and EU structural policies with the results shaping economic, environmental and spatial planning. Currently, regional self-government in Slovakia struggles with the competence and fiscal decentralization while having a strong regional development mandate resulting into suboptimal EU standards (Bauer *et al.*, 2014; Švikruha, Mihálik, 2014). According to Finka (2015), decentralization in Slovakia has significantly adapted the planning processes in several levels of governance and enlarged local actors' power. On the other hand, the problems related to territorial fragmentation remain unresolved (Finka, 2015). These findings exemplify a common theme: Slovakia's regional policy has made strides in compatibility of the EU-wide objectives, but challenges of competence autonomy, fiscal autonomy, governance coordination remain persistent. Slovakia's EU accession in the Common Agricultural Policy has enabled financial support for rural areas modernisation, rise of agriculture competitiveness as well as innovations (Adamičková *et al.*, 2020). For example, EU regional development funds have promoted inter-municipal collaboration through Local Action Groups, facilitating public-private partnerships for sustainable regional growth. On the other hand, the rather artificial regional division in Slovakia may hinder the effectiveness of its self-government programmes (Malíková, Daško, 2020). EU-funded programmes and structural funds for underperforming and less

developed regions have posited Slovak regional policy from a sectoral to an integrated approach with a particular aim to systematize the priorities into comprehensive strategies (Némethová, Hudáková, 2019). Nevertheless, the EU funds have been of a great and positive impact, but the real ability to implement changes remain also a political question, including the need for augmented subsidies to enhance long-term productivity and innovation (Finka *et al.*, 2020). For comparison, before the EU accession, Slovak regional policy was practically non-existent and underdeveloped with limited resources and no strategic direction. The adoption of the EU cohesion policy has required innovative planning and implementation mechanisms at both the national and regional levels, which has been a significant step forward of Slovak regional policy making stemming from the EU integration and Europeanisation mechanism (Surubaru, 2017). On the other hand, the major challenges toward this framework remain those similar to pre-accession: bureaucracy, inexperience and politicisation (Medve-Bálint, 2014; Dúdeková, 2013; Bruszt, 2008). When eliciting the effectiveness of EU funding to Slovakia, we may encounter several difficulties, particularly in the initial years following its accession but also at later stages of EU integration. Complex EU funding mechanisms and limited administrative capacity often led to delays and poor results. Despite EU funds, regional disparities in Slovakia persist, raising concerns about the effectiveness of Europeanization process. The authors suggest that the impact of Europeanization on Slovak regional development has had a positive outcomes, especially in the form of funding provisions and the introduction of the strategic planning (Baun, Marek, 2014; Molle, 2007). For example, some regions were able to benefit from EU funds to a greater extent compared to others due to disparities in administrative capacity and governance (Medve-Bálint, 2014). From this reason, the major failures to implement EU regional policies and mechanisms in Slovakia are vested in governance, administration, fiscal decentralisation and the socio-political environment. Regional governments in Slovakia struggle to obtain meaningful financial autonomy and effective administration capacity, which, in practical terms limits their ability to implement EU-driven regional policies effectively (Bauer *et al.*, 2014). This challenge is also vested in the highly fragmented administrative regions of Slovakia and their modus operandi, which create inefficiencies in the performance and the execution of policies. The necessity for integrated governance is essential especially in the underdeveloped regions in South Eastern parts of Slovakia where anachronistic sectoral approaches impede comprehensive development (Finka *et al.*, 2020). In general, Slovakia has benefited from EU funds and mechanisms but the long-term challenges lie in governance inefficiencies and limits, political instability, and the problems attaining fiscal autonomy at the regional level.

### **Europeanization of Regional Policy: The Political Parties' Approach**

The latest general elections in Slovakia were held on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2023. The electoral campaign started on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2023 with the elections announcement. There were 25 registered political subjects running for the elections, including a three-party coalition. The relevant topics that dominated the campaign included especially financial domains, energy sustainability and development, international orientation of the Slovak Republic, social issues such as unemployment, living standards and well-being as well as the debates related to the position of national state within consortium of states such as EU or NATO.

With regard to the sought aims and objectives of this article, we will proceed to analyse each relevant political party electoral manifesto to elicit the topics related to regional policy mechanisms. Our approach is to provide comparative content analysis of the sought topics.

#### ***SMER – Social Democracy***

SMER-SD focuses on regional disparities and improving regional policy. The programme also addresses the issue of decentralisation and local governance: proposes the reinforcement of the competencies of regional and local governments, enabling them to assume greater responsibilities and manage more resources autonomously. The objective is to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of local administrations, thereby ensuring that regional development is aligned with specific local needs. Particular emphasis is the allocation of resources on less developed regions: the construction of road networks, the provision of transport facilities, and the development of public services, which are regarded as instrumental in fostering economic growth in underdeveloped regions. The party intends to utilise EU funding in a more efficient manner for the advancement of regional development, particularly through the enhanced implementation of cohesion policy to address economic imbalances between regions. By optimising the distribution of financial resources, SMER-SD aspires to address the long-term economic disparities. The programme also promotes cohesion by reducing social disparities, addressing poverty, and supporting marginalised regions via European funds. With regard to Europeanization, SMER-SD recognises Slovakia's pivotal role within the EU, aiming to strike a balance between national interests and European goals, particularly in areas such as economic competitiveness, environmental policy, and migration. Furthermore, the party advocates for reforms to ensure that EU decisions respect Slovak national sovereignty.

#### ***Hlas – Social Democracy***

The HLAS-SD party emphasises regional development, including decentralisation, local



infrastructure and regional economies. The party emphasises the need to use EU funds more effectively, support SMEs and expand public services in underdeveloped regions. The party supports better links, jobs in rural areas and fairer sharing of resources to tackle regional differences. The policy aims to ensure balanced socio-economic growth across Slovakia. To reduce regional disparities, HLAS-SD proposes a National Plan for Removing Regional Differences, requiring an investment of at least €1 billion annually. HLAS-SD also strives to optimise EU funds for sustainable regional growth and align local initiatives with European priorities.

### ***Progressive Slovakia***

This programme demonstrates Slovak dedication to the EU and its support for enhanced integration. As a committed EU member, Slovakia plays an active role in collective initiatives such as the Green Deal. For the party, it is crucial to utilise EU funds to reduce regional disparities. Progressive Slovakia emphasises the significance of reducing regional inequality through investment, innovation and alignment with European standards. These priorities reflect a vision for sustainable growth. Progressive Slovakia's goal is to reduce regional disparities through infrastructure investment and job creation to increase capacity in regions that have historically experienced underdevelopment. The vision is to ensure efficient utilization of structural funds to enhance regional competitiveness alongside addressing historical challenges such as unemployment and disparity among regions in their accessing resources. The party addresses long-standing issues such as long-time unemployment, socio-economic depression and disparities among regions concerning accessing resources.

### ***Freedom and Solidarity***

Emphasis is put on the decentralisation of power and the empowerment of local governments, which is a fundamental aspect of regional development. The programme identifies a scarcity of financial motivation for municipalities to foster economic activities within their territories. The plan aims to incentivise local authorities to attract investments and reduce regional disparities by gradually increasing the share of taxes that municipalities can retain. This aligns with broader EU objectives for regional cohesion, which aim to reduce socio-economic gaps between regions. It suggests that Slovakia has significant room to align more closely with EU cohesion goals by increasing regional and local economic autonomy. With regard to EU cohesion policy, the document reflects similar goals by suggesting that a decentralisation approach, linked to economic activities, will harmonise regional and national interests. This could result in a better alignment with EU-funded programmes aimed at reducing regional imbalances across

Europe. The concept of Europeanization is a more nuanced but nevertheless prominent theme, particularly in the programme's approach to EU-related funds and legislation. The document emphasizes a commitment to the comprehensive utilisation of EU structural funds. The programme also indicates that Slovakia will play an active role in influencing EU-wide policies, particularly in areas such as climate change and financial regulation. The party programme demonstrates a strong alignment with EU cohesion goals through its focus on fiscal decentralisation and efforts to balance regional disparities. The programme's stance on utilising EU funds and shaping EU-level policy reflects the ongoing process of Europeanization in Slovak regional and economic policy.

### ***Slovakia Movement***

The programme addresses regional disparities and socio-economic cohesion while aligning with EU standards. There are significant economic disparities between Slovak western regions and the south and east. The party is drafting a new regional development law. This legislation addresses 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges by incorporating international practices. The programme supports local and regional infrastructure, transport and digital connectivity, and local industry. The programme suggests tax incentives and more investment in industrial parks and public infrastructure in areas with high unemployment. These measures aim to revitalise underdeveloped regions, contributing to Slovakia's economic growth. They also seek to enhance local governance, promote EU involvement and advocate for improved governance within EU institutions.

### ***Christian Democratic Movement***

The concept of regional development is emphasised, with subsidiarity as a guiding principle. They promote decentralisation and give regional authorities more autonomy, including financial control. The party empowers local communities to manage public affairs, including the regional economy, tourism, and ecological initiatives. The EU emphasises the need to support SMEs in less developed regions. This support is directed towards local economies, agritourism and family businesses, which are regarded as stabilising forces for economic growth. This focus is aligned with the EU's cohesion policy, which aims to reduce disparities between regions. The programme demonstrates a clear and unwavering commitment to European integration and the structures that underpin the Euro-Atlantic alliance. The party has articulated its stance on Slovakia's continued membership and active role in the European Union and NATO. The objective is to establish Slovakia as an integral component of the European market, with policies that align with EU standards

in environmental protection, energy security, and economic development. The programme is aligned with the principles of EU cohesion policy by advocating regional development, decentralisation, and sustainable economic growth. Their stance on Europeanisation reflects support for continued integration with EU systems, while maintaining a critical perspective on how EU regulations are applied at the national level.

#### ***Slovak National Party***

SNS focuses on regional development with a plan that outlines strategies for improving regional infrastructure through the construction and enhancement of transport networks. They also propose a Ministry of Tourism and Sport and local accommodation initiatives. The party's support for SMEs and rural economies shows its commitment to improving quality of life in underdeveloped regions. The SNS aims to decentralise governance and give regions greater control over development projects. These proposals align with EU policies

promoting regional self-determination and the distribution of decision-making authority to lower levels of governance. While SNS acknowledges the EU, it is also Eurosceptic. The party has pledged to resist the centralisation of power by the EU and has expressed opposition to certain EU mandates. This stance favours Slovak sovereignty and limits EU influence on national decision-making. The SNS wants to use EU funding effectively, especially for regional development. The party's focus on equal access to EU agricultural subsidies benefits Slovak farmers. The manifesto calls for reforms to EU policies that the party deems unduly burdensome for Slovakia, particularly in agriculture and economic regulation. It advocates regional development as a means of fostering national unity and safeguarding cultural identity. With regard to Europeanisation, the party's stance demonstrates a balanced approach between leveraging EU resources and resisting policies that they perceive as undermining Slovakia's sovereignty.

### **Conclusion**

The recent general elections in Slovakia have highlighted the need to address regional disparities. Decentralisation is a key topic in political debate. This empowers regional and local communities and ensures responsive governance. Political parties have presented proposals on using European Union funds for regional development. Political parties advocate for better management and distribution of funds to boost economic growth and improve quality of life in underdeveloped regions. This approach reduces economic inequalities and promotes a fairer distribution of resources. The focus on regional governance aims to foster participatory and transparency in decision-making. Political parties are increasingly recognising the view that regional and local authorities are the most appropriate level at which to gain an understanding of and respond to the specific requirements of their communities. All analysed parties aim to empower regional governments and policy making and encourage sustainable development. The manifestos of the political parties in question show a commitment to aligning national policies with European standards, which is essential for Slovakia's integration. Such alignment ensures that regional strategies align with EU goals, including sustainability, inclusion and resilience. The elections showed Slovakia's recognition of regional development. The political landscape is becoming increasingly decentralised, with a focus on using EU resources effectively and strengthening regional governance. These efforts aim to promote economic growth and social cohesion, ensuring all regions can flourish while addressing local needs and contributing to sustainable development. By implementing these policies it will be beneficial for Slovakia to shape a more equitable and prosperous future for all its citizens, especially in the context of regional decentralization.

#### **Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic (VEGA) under Grant number 1/0167/22.

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